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Peer Assisted Learning: Project Update

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Laying the ground for new initiatives can be an exciting yet challenging experience. Reflecting on the implementation of the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) pilot study to date, the views of students from across the scheme have been reassuringly positive, which is entirely as a result of the endeavours and commitment of the staff and students involved. Pioneering something new can be a lonely road at times, but the feedback and response from the students makes it one worth travelling.

Yes, there have been a few bumps in the road on the journey towards the notion of peer assisted learning being part of the wider student experience at this university. Yes, it has and will continue to take time for something new to become accepted and embedding into the culture of academic departments. Yes, PAL is striving to establish itself against a backdrop of logistical and inevitable staff and student time pressures where other activities are placed higher on the priority list.

Whilst the steps towards success may not always have been big strides, PAL has certainly made its mark upon those who have been participated of the study; first year participants, PAL Leaders and Academic Course Contacts (ACCs) (unit tutors who are responsible for timetabling PAL and directly

supporting their PAL Leaders in terms of the flavour and content of the PAL session).

PAL fosters cross-year support between students on the same course. Its origins are from SI (Supplemental Instruction) schemes from the USA (Martin, Blanc & DeBuhr, 1983), which are timetabled, but voluntary, student-led study skills sessions. Utilising trained, experienced second and/or third year students to guide new students and to facilitate discussions, PAL is intended to help students:

- adjust quickly to university life;
- acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations;
- develop their independent learning and study skills to meet the requirements of HE;
- enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative discussion;
- prepare better for assessed work and examinations (Fleming, 2008).

PAL also helps to de-mystify the parlance and academic jargon often used in universities, to unpick themes and topics encountered in lectures and to help new students to help themselves when problems and issues arise.

To put Peer Assisted Learning into context, the

pilot forms part a wider PAL community within UK HEIs. Since the first UK HEFCE-funded project to explore Peer Assisted Learning was developed by Kingston University in 1989, there are currently 340 peer mentoring programmes operating across 159 universities. This accounts for 86% of UK universities (Andrews & Clark, 2011) and should be interpreted as being indicative of the benefits PAL can bring to an institution and its students.

Since September 2011 the CLE co-ordinated PAL pilot has trained 28 PAL leaders in the following seven discipline areas:

1. Computing
2. Interior Design/Interior Architecture
3. Social Work
4. Education
5. Sports Coaching
6. English
7. Performing Arts

PAL Leaders run a one hour PAL session with a group of first year students (10-20 students approx.) on a weekly basis. Around 650 first year students across the seven discipline areas have experienced PAL in Term 1.

The sessions have been linked with a named unit in order to give them purpose and structure. The sessions have also been operated as scheduled, timetabled events rather than opt-in sessions. This was a strategic decision as the literature constantly indicates the need to avoid PAL being badged as 'remedial' in any way. A recent large study by Andrews & Clark (2011) confirmed that:

University-wide 'opt-out' programmes in which peer mentoring is offered to all new students, are particularly successful because in capturing the whole population of new starters peer mentoring is not viewed by students as a 'deficit model of provision' but is instead seen and accepted as part of the university culture (page 83).

Areas of Strength (University of Bedfordshire pilot findings – Term 1)

- positive feedback from the majority of participants;
- participants expressing interest in becoming PAL Leaders next academic year;

- some very committed Academic Course Contacts (ACCs) who have given a lot of time and effort to the scheme;
- PAL Leaders comment that scheme has improved their confidence and communication skills;
- tutor feedback indicates those who attend PAL regularly have improved understanding of their course and are more interested and engaged.

Areas for Improvement (University of Bedfordshire pilot findings – Term 1)

- initial briefing and training of ACCs to ensure greater understanding of PAL and their role;
- timetabling to ensure appropriate rooms and times on days when other sessions are scheduled;
- scheduled and compulsory ongoing PAL Leader training.

Feedback has been gathered via interview and focus groups with PAL stakeholders throughout Term 1. The overwhelming findings suggest that first year students are positive about PAL. When asked about why they attended and what they got out of the sessions, the majority of first year students commented upon the 'safe and informal environment' where they were free to ask 'stupid questions' which they would not be comfortable asking their tutor. This chimes with many other PAL studies where the perceived lack of formality and judgment is cited as being a major reason for participating. Tariq (2005) states that:

undergraduates found PAL a highly valuable learning experience. In particular, they found the less formal, comfortable and relaxed atmosphere of the PAL session provided them with greater freedom to ask questions and exerted less pressure on them to answer questions correctly than a more formal staff-led session, as well as assisting them to understand the topics covered.

Students also unanimously voiced praise for PAL in terms of the empathetic relationship between themselves and the PAL Leader with the PAL Leader having direct experience and study success to draw upon. Studies by Martin & Arendale (1993) note that 'successful second and third-year students are better equipped than lecturers to help first-year students to become expert students'.

Whilst most were positive, there have been small pockets of resistance from some students (mainly mature students) who felt they did not need help and did not see the wider benefits of PAL in terms of social and community interaction. This is not uncommon and numerous studies have identified that 'students resent being forced to participate in remedial modules and programmes' (Smith *et al.*, 2007). This perception has been noted and steps taken to inform all students that collaborative working is beneficial to them and that PAL is for all students, not those who need additional help with their studies.

Other studies also make it clear that the issues and challenges experienced thus far are not isolated to this pilot. Early adapters of PAL have written extensively of issues with perception, buy in and establishing PAL as a cultural norm within a university. Falchikov (2002) identifies 'persuading colleagues and overcoming resistance to change as key to the process, particularly in terms of selling the scheme'. Capstick *et al.*, (2004) reinforce Falchikov's findings stating:

PAL must be widely supported by colleagues to ensure the initiative is championed by many rather than by two members of staff and also to elicit collaboration for instance by suggesting to students possible activities that may be used in PAL sessions.

Whilst Ashwin (2002) goes on to suggest that:

...at managerial or institutional level PAL should therefore be presented to them (staff and students) as 'a tool to shape and support courses.

In terms of attendance and participation, the pilot has performed well with some areas enjoying significant attendance rates. To benefit from PAL, 'it has been shown that students need to attend regularly, i.e. at least 40-50% of the sessions' (Donelan and Kay, 1998; Coe *et al.*, 1999 cited by Fostier & Carey, 2007). The overall average attendance across all seven discipline areas was around 35% which is not particularly out of step with other studies. Indeed, in the pilot run by Fostier & Carey (2007) at Manchester University, they recorded: '23% became regular participants (i.e. attended 4 or more sessions). This was considered to be a very good level of participant retention for the pilot year (Coe *et al.*, 1999; Ashwin, 2002) as many established SI schemes do not exceed this figure (Ashwin, 2003).

However, in areas using third year PAL leaders, coupled with supportive ACCs who met weekly with PAL Leaders and offered clear steers with regard to content and themes to discuss, the attendance averaged 65% which far exceeds published PAL attendance data. These groups also had to contend with PAL being timetabled on days when there were no other scheduled sessions for the first year students. When first year students were asked why they came in on a Friday afternoon when they had no other classes, the response was simply that they enjoyed 'getting their heads around tricky stuff from lectures' as well as 'being able to talk and learn in a friendly environment'.

Whereas the PAL path is now well trodden in many HEIs, it is still relatively untouched at the University of Bedfordshire. The steps taken in Term 1 have been significant ones. Whilst they have been made by relatively few, it is hoped that greater numbers will take those same steps in the forthcoming academic year in order to tap into the benefits of PAL.

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